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PLOT ANALYSIS THROUGH CLASSIFICATION

BY FREDERICK DYER ANDERSON

FRIEND READER, you know, and I know that you know, that there is nothing new under the sun, either on the screen or the printed page. The old situations are with us day after day, merely dressed up with new twists and new treatment. Your endeavor as a writer is to discover the new twist and to concoct new recipes from the old ingredients.

In studying any creation, whether of commerce or of art, the paramount thing is to take it apart, see how it is made, and learn thereby to build. The framework or anatomy comes first. The covering of flesh, at the beginning of our study, is secondarily important. One may "get over" with brilliance of incident and atmosphere when substance is lacking, but the chances are against it. A piece of fiction or a photoplay must be a really good story to be accepted. It must have a plot and the plot must be developed in a new way. I will not discuss what a new twist or an original situation is; in fact, there really is no description except to say that it is *new*.

It is of prime importance for one who is endeavoring to write fiction or photoplays to classify stories in a simple and comprehensive manner. To this end the following classification is suggested. It has afforded the author much satisfaction to analyze plots in the light of its attempted definiteness and brevity. He who understands the mainspring of a man's character, of a mechanical device, or of a story, will speedily learn to know the thing in its entirety.

Man has ever sought to bring about unity, to find a single principle behind the astounding disorder of existence. Hence come the concepts of Nature, Providence, and religious beliefs, particularly Monotheism. To those who believe in one God it is easy to conceive of the eternal justice that underlies all things. Let the writer never lose sight of this. It is not a mere matter of policy so to order your characters that right is rewarded and wrong punished; it is a matter

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of truth. Justice and harmony do prevail. The instances of apparent injustice are examples of the rule and not exceptions. The deepest disappointment that ever came to an individual, in the light of the universal good—yes, even in the light of the individual good—was eminently just. A moment's thought will show any reasonable person that, in many cases, his defeats have merely turned him aside from things that he should not have attempted, to something vastly better. If nothing else, they have nerved him and steeled him for the big venture and the big success to come. Justice, compensation, reward and punishment run as glorious threads thru all life and therefore thru all properly constructed fiction and plays. Thus there is one word that may be applied to all true-to-life plots, and that is *Balance*. This is precisely what is meant by justice, compensation, and the like—there is balance, and all life is thereby governed.

With this background conception in mind let us climb to an Olympus where, like gods of old, we may look down on creation.

Our first sweeping glance takes in a world whirling, changing, moving. Man is ever striving to do something, to accomplish something, to change his status, moral or emotional, to proceed from this point to that. A first subdivision of plots may therefore be called the *Achievement* plot.

Again we look down, with eyes that see clearly and far, and behold a world in which lying, deceit and error seem to hold sway. Not a pretty picture; would that it were cleared up, and order brought out of chaos. The playwright looks down upon this falsity

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and confusion and says, "Let there be light." And there is light. The clearing up makes the story. Let us call the second subdivision *Deception*.

Another glance and the panorama seems changed. Everywhere is man, bartering, buying and selling, trading with his neighbor. He must live, and it is elemental that something must be given up for what is obtained. *Sacrifice*—that is the word. Love, honor, reputation, success, are relinquished that a desired end may come. "Take this and leave something in its place." Thus the world goes 'round. A third subdivision may therefore be called the *Sacrifice* plot.

Each of the subdivisions admits of further division, which may be summarized as follows:

General plot basis: BALANCE.

Subdivided into: 1. ACHIEVEMENT.

- (a) Attainment of a goal.
- (b) Reform.
- (c) Revenge.

2. DECEPTION.

- (a) Wilful.
- (b) Mistake.

3. SACRIFICE.

- (a) Selfish.
- (b) Altruistic.

Under *Achievement* A sets out to go to X or perform Y. He is aided by B and opposed by C. Mix them together and you have a story. It is not so easy as that, but perhaps this is a fair statement of *Attainment of a Goal*, which may also be called the *Straight Achievement* plot. In "Skinner's Dress Suit" a young bank clerk, after equipping himself with a dress suit, sets out to climb. The suit proves an open sesame at all doors, and a spur to his ambition. The course of this attempt and its results make the story a good example of *Straight Achievement*. Under this heading also fall stories where youth hitches its wagon to a star and comes up in the neighborhood of a planet. We admire the youthful hero for his attempt to attain the highest object, but justice is done and all are satisfied by his obtaining something better fitted than the original object to his development and abilities.

Achievement may concern *Reform*. By this is meant a change in moral status, as in stories that deal with drink, drugs, or religion; or there may be a change in emotional status. Here belong stories and plays of the "he learned to love her" sort, and the turning of a slacker into a patriot.

Achievement may likewise deal with the old favorite, *Revenge*. "The Count of Monte Christo" and "Within the Law" are examples. A wrong is done. The story tells of its punishment, usually by a character who takes the law into his own hands.

Deception plots usually involve a lie, that is to say, the active machination of a character to implant a mistaken or false concept in the mind of another. This may concern either a contemporary state of facts or a past situation. Under the former fall masquerade stories, those in which someone is falsely presented as another's spouse, and the like. Comedy and farce employ this plot freely. Mystery stories belong here.

The false statement of previously existing facts is, of course, the ever-new story of a human being's "past." The past of one of the characters is hidden. Can it be kept under cover? The attempt of that character to keep others in the dark, and the attempt of the villain—or it may be the hero—to bring things to light are the backbone of the story.

The deception may, however, be caused by circumstances, rather than by the will of persons. The distinguishing feature between the *Wilful Deception* and that based upon Mistake is that the former is active, the latter passive. Somebody is in the dark, through a mistaken conception of circumstances. The supposed death of an absent spouse and its consequences, as in "Enoch Arden," contribute an example. The mistaken identity plot naturally belongs in this classification.

Sacrifice has been potent plot material since the "Antigone." The sacrifice may rebound to the advantage of him who makes it. Usually it happens that the sacrifice is discovered by another character, who does not allow it to go unrewarded. The ordering of the situation may inevitably bring this result. The hero shields another by confessing his crime. The real culprit is discovered and the hero wins the heroine's affections or the plaudits of his associates. This type is often closely related to the Deception plot, but may usually be distinguished. The question is, which is the more important, which engages the attention to the overshadowing of the other, the sacrifice or the lie that covers up the truth. So much for the *Selfish Sacrifice*.

There may be no advantage accruing to the hero. The one for whom the sacrifice is made alone benefits. The woman gives up her

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lover in order not to interfere with his happiness or career. Suicide removes a bar to another's happiness. Of course there is a benefit or advantage in carrying thru the sacrifice successfully, but this is a sentimental advantage. The distinguishing mark between *Selfish* and *Altruistic* Sacrifice is not the motive or intention of the hero, but the result. Great care is necessary to frame the *Altruistic Sacrifice* with proper balance.

The following are examples of plots that have been made into successful moving pictures, set forth in the light of the foregoing classification. It often happens that a given plot will appear to belong in more than one subdivision, and sometimes it is difficult to decide just where to place it. This speaks well for the plot, for the more elements it has the better, provided that they are unified and co-ordinated.

JOAN OF PLATTSBURG—Goldwyn, Mabel Normand.

(Straight Achievement.)

Joan hears the story of her namesake, Joan of Arc, and she so desires to help her country that she arouses the interest of the officers at camp. She, too, hears "voices," and she uncovers the work of German spies. Later she is happy with her soldier lover returned from France.

THE GOLDEN IDIOT—Essenay, Bryant Washburn.

(Straight Achievement.)

A young man takes to the open road to seek his fortune. After many miles and various adventures his personal charm wins him, instead of the fortune, many friends, a job, and the girl.

THE LIGHT WITHIN—Petrova.

(Straight Achievement.)

A woman physician refuses to give up her profession and her research work looking to the discovery of a serum for preventing anthrax, although her husband behaves inhumanly to discourage her, pretending death, then causing the death of their son by neglect. Finally the husband is infected while interfering with an experiment, and upon his death she is free to marry her assistant.

REVELATION—Metro, Nazimova.

(Achievement, Reform predominating.)

An artist is commissioned to paint "The Madonna of the Rose Bush." His mistress frightens away all prospective models and insists on posing for the picture. In a moment of inspiration she looks so pure and holy in the robes of the Madonna that she is accepted. The rose bush that had not bloomed in a thousand years blossoms where her hand lies. Inspired by the miracle, she puts aside her former life and begins anew. Later as a Red Cross nurse she saves the artist's life and with her new ideals they seek happiness together.

NAUGHTY, NAUGHTY—Paramount, Enid Bennett.

(Achievement, with Reform elements.)

Roberta comes back from school to a puritanical small town, and shocks the narrow "natives" with her new ways. She goes so far as to introduce a filmy-robed dance at a charity affair. In the end, however, she settles down, having instilled some life, along with a broad-minded spirit, into the town.

LET'S GET A DIVORCE—Paramount, Billie Burke.

(Achievement of the Reform type.)

Cyprienne falls in love and marries, but finds marriage tiresome. She seeks further romance with her husband's cousin. The husband agrees to a divorce and welcomes his wife's future husband. Cyprienne, disillusioned by the arrangement, decides that she loves her present husband after all.

REACHING FOR THE MOON—Arctcraft, Douglas Fairbanks.

(Achievement with Reform elements.)

Doug, a clerk in a button factory, sets out to walk with kings. He seeks this consummation by concentrating, which he does so hard that he falls asleep. His dream adventures with kingship fully reconcile him to what fate has in store, and he is glad to marry the girl who loves him, and to resume his happy, ordinary life.

TOYS OF FATE—Metro, Nazimova.

(Achievement, of which the object is Revenge.)

Hagar's gypsy husband vows revenge on Griswold, who had run away with Hagar. When her daughter grows up the gypsy uses the daughter to ensnare Griswold. She marries him, but does not love him and is made free by his drinking poison intended for herself.

THE LAW OF THE LAND—Paramount, Petrova.

(Achievement of the Revenge type, containing Sacrifice elements.)

The woman marries to save the family fortune, but finds her husband a cad and a brute. She murders him because he has been brutal to her little son. A kind-hearted police inspector enters the death of the man as suicide.

HOW COULD YOU, JEAN?—Paramount, Mary Pickford.

(Deception of the Wilful variety.)

Jean, an aristocratic young girl, is obliged to work, and becomes a cook. A young millionaire, won by her beauty, obtains employment in the same house. In the end they learn each other's real identity and all ends happily.

BAB'S DIARY—Paramount, Marguerite Clark.

(Deception of the Wilful variety.)

Bab insists that she is grown up and can wear V-shaped gowns and beads, and in resentment at her family's refusal she creates an imaginary lover from whom she sends herself flowers, letters, etc. The actor whose picture she passes off as her fiancé is induced to pose as the lover, much to Bab's consternation. She attempts to recover her letters from his apartment and is arrested as a burglar, and later taken home, where explanations are in order.

MRS. DANE'S DEFENSE—Paramount, Pauline Frederick.

(Deception—Wilful attempt to conceal a past.)

A governess loves not wisely but too well. Under the name of Mrs. Dane she becomes the fiancé of a gentleman. Suspicions arise like ghosts, and under the grilling of the father of her fiancé she breaks down and confesses. She is consoled in her love for her child.

THE BRAND OF SATAN—World, Montague Love.

(Deception due to mistake.)

A young district attorney resolves to bring a notorious criminal, "the Strangler," to justice. He suddenly learns that he and "the Strangler" are one and the same thru an unsuspected dual personality. His attempt to atone for his subconscious crimes and his restoration to normality by an operation conclude the story.

THE OTHER MAN—Vitagraph, Harry Morey and Grace Darmond.

(Deception, chiefly through Mistake.)

Doctor Stedman learns of his wife's infidelity and sinks to the lowest walks of life. He is helped upward by Dorothy Harmon, an heiress living in disguise in the slums. They become separated for several months; meeting again on terms of social equality they fail to recognize each other, and Dorothy is on the point of refusing him, because of the "other man," but they learn the truth and seek happiness together.

SHARK MONROE—Artercraft, Wm. S. Hart.

(Sacrifice—Altruistic but with Selfish results.)

A young girl and her brother work their passage on Shark Monroe's schooner. Later they fall into bad hands. Shark abducts the girl but gives her up when he finds she does not care for him. He allows the brother to thrash him, which makes a man of him and he wins the girl.

THE MATERNAL INSTINCT—Triangle.

(Sacrifice—Altruistic.)

A family moves to the city and the husband becomes enamored of an adventuress. His employer, a loyal friend, learns of this and causes him to lose his money. Meanwhile the wife appeals to the adventuress through the mother love that is in the heart of every woman, and the latter, truly loving the man, sends him from her. The reunited family, wiser and happier, return to the home town.

STELLA MARIS—Artercraft, Mary Pickford.

(Sacrifice—Altruistic.)

Stella Maris, a cripple, is kept from the world, and does not know of her lover's unfortunate marriage. His wife, in a fit of drunken anger, beats Unity, the little maid of all work, and is sentenced to prison. John adopts Unity, who cares for him with slavish devotion. Stella Maris is cured and learns of John's marriage. John is miserable, so Unity goes to the home of his released wife, kills her, and then shoots herself. Stella Maris and John are married.

The practical synthetic application of the foregoing will depend largely upon the individual. Much will have been done if the clouds that usually accompany the first idea of a story are in part dispelled by a lightning stroke, which may be the result of applying this classification. (To be continued next month)

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